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AUTHOR Woodward, Arthur
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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes seven widely-used fifth grade social studies textbooks with the hypothesis that texts are unnecessarily loaded with poorly conceived instructional design features that often do not relate to content or skills and tend to minimize the primary function of the texts. Using present and future challenges facing the United States as a target topic, a detailed analysis uncovered a fairly traditional and standard treatment of history. However, the concepts of present and future are defined by only three themes--equality, environment, and space. Though attractively presented, a careful reading of the texts revealed a superficial and minimalist treatment of various concepts that was uninspiring. Despite the occasional appearance of well written and thoughtfully researched textbook sections the overall impression from these seven texts was one of mediocrity with no real point of view or controversy, leading to speculation that the texts were written without regard to the instructional and interest needs of fifth graders. The final analysis indicates that students may learn only a series of snapshots of events and topics, and may further find it difficult to articulate information or generalizations about their country. A brief list of references, including the Social Studies Series analyzed, concludes the paper. (TRS)

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The Treatment of Recent U.S. History in Elementary School Social Studies Textbooks:

A Case Study of the Breadth and Depth of Content Coverage

Arthur Woodward

University of Rochester

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Address for correspondence: Arthur Woodward PhD
P.O. Box 27685
University of Rochester
River Station
Rochester, NY 14627

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The Treatment of Recent U.S. History in Elementary Social Studies Textbooks: A Case Study of the Breadth and Depth of Content Coverage

The "Loaded" Textbook: Image vs. Substance

Like the dinosaur gas guzzling automobiles of the 1950s and 1960s with their wings, lamps, chrome, and overpowered engines, the modern day textbook is also "loaded." These textbooks are attractive and appear to provide everything that a teacher might need to teach well. From artistic design, to worksheets, to tests, to student assignments, to teachers' guides, textbooks give the appearance of sophisticated and high quality materials- materials whose very attractiveness makes them appealing to consumers shopping around for textbooks. And like the makers of the dinosaur automobile, textbook publishers have put a premium on image rather than substance. Thus, textbooks have been judged not on how effectively they transmit knowledge and skills, but on criteria that are tangential to their instructional quality and effectiveness.

In response to a growing concern with the quality of educational achievement in the United States, elementary and secondary school textbooks have been sharply criticized for their poor instructional design and inadequate scholarship. For example, California Superintendent Bill Honig, has charged that textbooks are too easy and that pupils are not challenged or interested by what they learn from their texts (Trombley, 1982). The Commission on Excellence and Education's *A Nation At Risk* (1983) and subsequent reports by professional associations and state education authorities have cited the poor instructional quality of textbooks as a major cause of educational decline in the United States. Commentators and researchers (Bernstein, 1985; Armbruster, Osborn & Davison, 1985; Brewer, Jenkins & Harp, 1984) have questioned the widespread and uncritical application of readability formulas in determining the "difficulty" of textbooks. Researchers such as Armbruster and Anderson (Kantor, Anderson & Armbruster, 1983; Armbruster & Anderson, 1984; and Armbruster & Anderson, 1985) have found expository text to be poorly organized, badly written, difficult to follow, and often illogical. And Osborn (1984), Durkin (1984), and Woodward (1986a, 1986b) have found that basic textbook design features such as photographs, teachers' guides, and worksheets often do not relate to content and skills lessons.

So "loaded" are these textbooks with what researchers have shown to be unnecessary or poorly designed instructional design features that the primary function of textbooks -- to transmit knowledge and skills, is minimized. Indeed, Woodward (1986c) in a study of seven high school Civics textbooks found that 29 percent of the *average* text was taken up with glossary, index, student activities, unit title pages and the like. After photographs and other illustrations had been eliminated from the text (many of them irrelevant to the content being covered) only 53 percent of the *average* textbook was devoted to expository, content based text. Thus, given the multiplicity of photographs, student activity pages, and the like that are found in every textbook and the requirement that textbooks cover the numerous topics that define a subject area, to what extent can students learn about a topic in sufficient depth so that he or she can understand,

discuss, and become excited by it?

In order to explore the issue of depth of coverage, a topic that was common to seven fifth grade social studies textbooks-- the present and future challenges facing the United States, was chosen. The textbooks (copyrights 1982-1984), were published by well known school publishers and were in wide use in elementary school classrooms throughout the nation.

One reason for choosing the present and future challenges facing the United States was that this topic, appearing at the end of the history of the country, seemed to be the capstone where the complex threads of the skein of topics that define American history, culture, values, and politics met. Thus, it was hoped that discussions of economic change, the environment, civil rights, and technology would be meaningful because they could be placed in the context of the historical development of the United States. Clearly, after completing a year of studying the United States it was expected that through the final chapter on the present and future challenges facing the country, students would acquire an understanding of the developments that will define the future development of the country and their role in it.

The United States: Present and Future Challenges

The seven textbooks that I analyzed all presented a fairly traditional and standard treatment of the history of the United States. All textbooks started with the first Americans and ended with a section of contemporary events and the challenges facing the country in the future. Given the numerous topics these fifth grade texts covered and the relatively limited amount of space in which publishers could devote to each one it was not surprising that with the exception of topics such as the Revolutionary War and the Civil War (topics where there was clearly a strong and unambiguous consensus of their importance), each topic received very little actual coverage.

With one exception, the seven textbooks I analyzed defined the present and the future by just three themes -- equality, the environment, and space. The Follett text was alone in discussing telecommunications and computers, and the implications of population growth. Generally, for all the textbooks very little space was devoted to covering the topics that defined the present and the future. For example, McGraw-Hill devoted three pages - including illustrations - to equal rights, three pages to new Americans, two and a half pages to the space age, and six pages to the future. Holt devoted three pages including illustrations to science and progress and six to equal rights. Generally, on the basis of the analysis the topics the textbooks covered were surprisingly vapid and contained little of real substance although McGraw-Hill's discussion of the economy, and Scott, Foresman's discussion of civil rights was excellent and sophisticated despite their space limitations. However, more typical of the approach the texts adopted was McGraw-Hill's treatment of the future, which was disconcertingly aimless and diffident. On civil rights, this text ended a brief discussion with the statement, "There will probably be still more reforms in the future. Americans believe in justice for all." On energy, "Ways must be found to provide the American people with the energy they need at a price they can afford." On the economy, "You can also see that solving these problems will be

a difficult challenge."

The textbooks in detail: One challenge after another

Macmillan's *Social Studies* fifth grade text emphasized human rights, energy and ecology. Its chapter, "Recognizing Human Rights" began: "Individual rights and freedoms have been important to people in America for hundreds of years ... An important part of American history has been the struggle to extend civil rights to all Americans (p. 141)." The efforts of Rosa Parks, the NAACP, and Dr. Martin Luther King are highlighted. Students are told that Coretta King,

> continues to bring the message of peace and justice to Americans (and that) while there has been progress, there is much more to be done to achieve racial equality. More than 1,500,000 black families live in poverty...The job of solving these problems is a task not only for blacks. It is a task for all Americans. (p. 144)

The textbook also covered the efforts of women to obtain equality -- an important goal "because more than half of American women work outside the home (p. 144)." Mexican Americans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans are discussed; with Puerto Ricans portrayed unflatteringly - "Many Puerto Ricans do not speak English. They are not used to the life in cities because many have lived and worked on farms .... Today, many schools have special programs for their Spanish-speaking students. Puerto Ricans have learned new skills...(p. 146)."

In its section on energy and ecology, Macmillan noted that after polluting the air and water and using up resources "Americans are just beginning to realize that resources must be used wisely. (p. 147)." The new energy sources of solar, geothermal, wind and nuclear are described. Nuclear power plants "need to be kept safe." Nuclear waste "must be disposed of carefully...If leaks occur, harmful radiation can escape. (p. 149)"

In McGraw-Hill's *Our Nation, Our World*, the fifth grade textbook includes equal rights, new Americans, the space age, and the future. In the section on equal rights the unequal treatment of Blacks and their efforts to change this are thoroughly described. Since the Civil Rights laws "Blacks made more progress. Some were elected to public office." The struggles of American Indians, Mexican-Americans and women are also described. The section ends by noting "There have been many changes in social conditions in the United States. There will probably be still more reforms in the future. Americans believe in justice for all (p. 323)."

"The Space Age" describes the space race and the U.S. space program; the 1975 joint Soviet-American space mission "showed that the two nations could work together in space (p. 331)." The benefits of the space program include communications and weather prediction. In response to a question about whether the space program is worth the money the text notes that it has brought many inventions that have made everyone's lives better and ends with a stirring quote from President Kennedy characterizing space as the last frontier where "new hopes for knowledge and peace" can be found.

Using the bicentennial as the point at which "many American Citizens looked at the problems facing the nation (p. 333)" the lesson "Into the Future" covers honesty in government, violence, energy, the environment and the economy. Honesty in government deals only with Watergate; "President Nixon tried to help his friends (p. 334)." The consequence of Watergate was that "laws were passed to help increase honesty in government (p. 334)." The assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the attempted assassination of President Reagan are used to illustrate the endemic problem of violence in the United States;

> Americans were reminded again and again about violence in the United States. But people did not seem to know what to do about it. Some said that all guns should be banned. Others said that taking guns away from people would mean that only criminals would have guns. But most people felt that something had to be done to stop violent crime (p. 334).

Energy was also a problem. As needs have expanded the country had become dependent on more expensive foreign energy. The section closed by noting "Many people cannot afford to pay these prices. Ways must be found to provide the American people with the energy they need at a price they can afford (p. 335)."

The section on resources and the environment explains the growing scarcity of resources and the causes and effects of pollution. The section ends; "Protecting our natural environment is an important challenge for the future (p.334)." "Economic Problems" is probably one of the more sophisticated sections of the unit; complex economic mechanisms are clearly explained. The interrelated problem of low productivity, investment and saving are discussed in terms of America's inability to compete with Japan. However, with the election of President Reagan we have his promise to "do something about the American economy." The section ends "You can see that the problems facing the American economy are all connected to one another. You can also see that solving these problems will be a difficult challenge. (p. 338)."

After devoting nine units to the history of the United States and ten to U.S. regions and neighbors, Follett's *Social Studies* concludes with a unit discussing the United States in the 21st century. The unit gives an in-depth study of the changes in population the country will experience and the effect this will have. Also included are ethnic, racial and aging patterns of the population. The second part of the unit deals with "Technologies and the Environment." It begins with the statement "We will face many challenges in the 21st century..." and then discusses energy, telecommunications and the environment. Although the discussion is quite brief, students who read these Follett sections will come away with a good sense of the problems and challenges America faced -- and hints at their solution. The section on energy discusses the country's dependence on nonrenewable energy supplies and uses a graph of production and consumption of petroleum to illustrate the problem of decreasing supplies. Conservation is discussed as a way of reducing energy needs. Alternate energy needs are described not in some vague sense, but with concrete examples;

> Much works needs to be one to make these renewable sources of power practical for everyday use. However, expriments using

> these sources of power are underway. In California, for example, a power plant already uses geothermal to make electric power....Experts believe that solar power can be made practical by putting huge solar collectors up in the sky. These satellites can collect solar energy and send it to earth for our use. (p. 477).

The chapter also covers how changes in telecommunications and computers will effect communication (electronic mail) and jobs; "Jobs will change too. More and more people will have computers that will enable them to work at home. Some people are already doing this...(p.477)." The section on the environment concentrates on the problem of acid rain.

Scott, Foresman's *Social Studies* contains two chapters in its fifth grade text dealing with recent events and problems - "Choices About Rights and Opportunities" and "Choices About the Environment." Scott, Foresman's treatment of equality was one of the more sophisticated of all the textbooks that were analyzed. Beginning with the poem "Stranger in the land..." the text vividly covers Brown vs. Board of Education, the work of Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, James Farmers, *as well as* Martin Luther King Jr. (Rosa Parks is featured in a special section), and the riots in Watts. "When the riots of the 1960s ended, not much had changed....Still, black people had come a long way since the end of World War II. They were making good the promise they made to themselves...(p.382)." The struggles of women and other minority groups are treated with similar depth and sophistication.

Scott, Foresman uses Apollo 8's awe-inspiring first photograph of the earth as the stimulus for concern about the environment;

> People were changing their environment without even knowing it. Farmers used dangerous chemicals on their land to make crops grow faster and more abundantly. Private companies and government leaders in cities and towns allowed waste to be dumped into lakes and rivers. Factory owners ran machines that poured unhealthy smoke into the air. Miners dug giant holes in the earth (p.390).

These problems and resource depletion resulted in the ecology movement and attempts to conserve energy and clean up polluted areas. The text notes the 1980s backlash to the cost of anti-pollution and conservation efforts;

> The people were in a different mood as the country entered the 1980s. They did not want the government to spend as much as it had in the past. The leaders in government responded by cutting back on many programs. Some of the first programs cut were those that protected the environment. The ecology movement did not end, but it did slow down. It had accomplished a lot, but much remained to be done (p. 392).

Scholastic's chapter on "New Directions" deals with the present and the future (civil rights was dealt with in the previous chapter with the Cold War and life in the 1950s). The years of President Kennedy represents the period that laid the foundation for the "new directions...our country (would) follow in the 1970s and 1980s

(p.393)." The Johnson War on Poverty was juxtaposed with the Vietnam War; we are told that the Vietnam War "divided Americans as no other war had since the Civil War (p. 394)." Unlike the palid description of President Nixon's role in Watergate found in McGraw Hill's text, the Scholastic text describes it as the covering up of a crime and of the President being forced to resign. Presidents Ford and Carter warrant only one line each. The recent movement for equality of Hispanics, Asian Americans and women are highlighted. In terms of women's rights the text notes, "There is no 'right' answer to which kind of life American women should lead. Women are individuals - people with different backgrounds, likes and dislikes, and hopes. The important thing is that all Americans should have the freedom to decide what they want to do with their lives (p.397)."

The text points out problems. Growth has brought pollution and resource depletion and the text notes "we will have to learn to conserve...our great natural resources (p. 397)." That means conserving oil and developing alternate energy sources; solar energy is the only alternative mentioned. However, with the election of President Reagan he "moved quickly with a bold new approach to the problems faced by the nation....By the early 1980's, a new mood of confidence seemed to return to the U.S. (p. 398)." And the future? "The future will surely hold many more challenges for the United States. How will these challenges be met? They will be faced and overcome by the Americans who are young today (p.398)."

Silver Burdett's *The World and Its People*'s fifth grade text devotes a unit to "A Time of Rapid Change" and uses the bicentennial as the basis for its discussion.

> The United States was a greatly different place in 1976 than it was in 1876, when the country celebrated its one hundredth birthday....In this chapter you will see how new ideas, inventions, and laws have made changes within the United States. People and events have come together to change the way our country think and acts (p. 240).

Most of the chapter covers the events leading up to the present; new discoveries (synthetic fibers, radio, T.V., aviation), the Depression, FDR and the New Deal. The last three pages of the chapter very briefly cover current topics. One section covers human rights - "Perhaps the great struggle for human rights since World War II best shows the pain and the promise of the United States...(p. 247)." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is the only civil rights leader mentioned. The final paragraph of the chapter states:

> Promise for the future - Americans must realize what a wonderful place this is to live. We have goods and wealth beyond the dreams of the world. We have ways to be heard when we disagree with one another and the government. We have freedom. We have sharp minds and fresh ideas. It is our responsibility to continue to build our country and fulfill the dreams of the brave men and women who have gone before us (p.249).

The final unit of Holt's *Social Studies* deals with "The United States Today: Challenge and Hope." As do other textbooks, Holt uses the bicentennial as the jumping off point for its chapter on

"Accomplishments and Challenges." This chapter is broken into three sections. "Space and Progress" includes a brief history of the space program from Sputnik I to the space shuttle Columbia, "The War Against Disease" notes advances in medicine (penicillin and microsurgury are the examples used), and "Speedy Machines" covers computers in society. "Advanced in Democracy" emphasizes civil rights:

> During the 1960s, the United States made great advances in space. Closer to home, however, we were making different types of progress. While doctors were curing long-feared diseases, other peple were looking at the problems of society. Discrimination and poverty needed solutions too (p. 388).

The final section is "Future Challenges" - the energy crisis, inflation and the Reagan administration, pollution and conservation, and "future improvements." The final paragraph of the text states: "Our society is changing rapidly. Throughout hisory, American have adjusted to society's changes and met its challenges. The challenges we face today will shape the United States of Tomorrow."

Conclusion

While the chapters dealing with the present and future appeared to be attractively designed, a careful reading of the text revealed a superficial and minimalist treatment of the various topics. It was difficult to see how students could acquire any understanding of the topics they were reading. Certainly, what they had read about the history of the United States in the months before had no relevance to the present and the future. The minimalist approach adopted by the publishers was on two levels. The challenges facing the country now and in the future were narrowly defined and generally limited to the environment, equal rights and space. Within these topics further minimalism was evident. For example, for most textbooks the civil rights movement was defined only by Dr. Martin Luther King. Indeed, it was as if including Dr. King was all that was really needed to claim that civil rights had been covered.

Yet, while generally the topics were uniformly banal and uninspired there were examples of good and often inspired writing and analysis of a topic. For example, despite space limitations Scott, Foresman contained a breathtakingly good section on civil rights, and McGraw-Hill an excellently clear explanation of current economic issues. It was easy to imagine students becoming excited and eager to learn more about these topics. While Scott, Foresman did a good job on civil rights, other topics were not so well done. The Follett text was also notable in that it used concrete examples to illustrate its discussion of various topics so that unlike other textbooks that seemed overly abstract it was easy to quickly grasp what the discussion was about.

Despite the occasional appearance of well written and thoughtfully researched textbook sections the overall impression from these textbooks is one of mediocrity. So many topics were covered that overall there was very little space to devote to each one. But, more importantly the textbooks seemed to have been written by committee, resulting in higher and higher levels of abstraction and a reluctance to include any author "point of view." Except for a few sections (one

suspects they were written by knowledgeable and inspired authors) there was no "point of view" but there seemed general agreement to emphasize the unexceptionable generalization (pollution is bad; civil rights are good) and to tone down controversy that might come from a too detailed and "case study" approach to covering a topic. Hence, the totally inadequate statements that concluded each topic (e.g., "You can also see that solving these problems will be a difficult challenge"). Most disturbing of all was the impression one had that these books had been written in a vacuum without regard to the instructional and interest needs of fifth graders.

Unfortunately, there is not much good to say about the quality the textbooks that were analyzed. From a careful analysis of the sections on the present and future challenges facing the United States, one must assume that students will learn very little other than a series of minimalist snap-shots of events and topics. Students will find it difficult to articulate information or generalizations about their country and even more difficult to draw on knowledge to help explain various phenomena. For like the dinosaur automobile the modern social studies textbooks seems to be high on image and low on substance.

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Address for correspondence: Arthur Woodward PhD. P.O. Box 27685, University of Rochester, River Station, Rochester NY 14627.